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ABSTRACT

Educational attainment for rural African Americans is lower than that of urban African Americans or rural Whites. The African American Church has always had a strong role in providing educational opportunities for African American children and in community activism in general. This digest discusses partnering with rural African American churches as a strategy to improve the educational achievement and attainment of African American children in the rural South. School partnerships with African American faith communities present an opportunity to build stronger communities and improve educational outcomes for youth. Because of concerns about the separation of church and state, partnerships between schools and faith communities must focus on the common ground, the welfare of the children and the betterment of their lives, not on religious education. Guidelines developed by the Department of Education are presented for partnerships with faith communities that respect the separation of church and state. Six strategies that schools can use to develop partnerships with African American faith communities are noted. (Contains 33 endnotes.) (TD)

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Rural Education Issue Digest

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A Strategy for Improving the Achievement of African American Students in Rural School Districts

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Rural Education
Issue Digest

Mobilizing African American Faith Communities:

A Strategy for Improving the Achievement of African American Students in Rural School Districts

by Dr. Patricia S. Kusimo and Dr. Harold D. Trulear

What is the most important challenge for the United States? Many would say that it is eliminating, once and for all, the still large educational achievement gaps among the nation's minority and ethnic groups.[1]

Introduction

Indicators of academic achievement repeatedly show that African American students are not faring well.[2] Low scores hold across the nation but are even lower in the rural South where approximately 80 percent of the rural African American population lives. Margaret Butler reports that rural African Americans had the lowest educational attainment in 1980 and 1990, when compared with both urban Blacks and rural Whites.[3] Ronald Wimberley and Libby Morris report that among rural African Americans, 82.1 percent of all school dropouts and 54.4 percent of those without high school diplomas live in the 11 Old South states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.[4]

Without some intervening entity, the educational malaise afflicting rural African American children is likely to continue. It is the authors' belief that African American faith communities are the most firmly established institutions in rural communities capable of partnering with schools to mitigate these circumstances. Andrew Billingsley writes, "Every black neighborhood and many nonblack ones have black churches as a major institutional presence."[5]

African American churches have a long history of rallying and mobilizing African Americans to action. In rural areas, these churches have a unique status as institutions that have strong loyal members, trust of the surrounding neighborhood, and ownership by the community.[6] Jones states, "From their earliest beginnings in the 1790s, black churches became and have continued to be the focal point of virtually every movement for change that affects their communities."[7]

This digest discusses partnering with rural African American churches as a strategy to improve the educational achievement and attainment of African American children in the rural South. This digest provides a brief overview of the rural South, examines the historic role of the African American church in mobilizing the African American community and providing educational opportunities for African American children, and presents data that suggest that community and parental involvement must be a part of efforts to improve student performance.

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Finally, guidelines and strategies demonstrate how to develop partnerships with African American faith communities. Such partnerships can increase the educational achievement and attainment of rural African American children.

Schooling and Poverty in the Rural South

Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky have found that teachers in the rural South

- are less satisfied than those in other regions with salaries, resources availability, class size, teaching as a career, and the level of "problems" in the learning environment
- receive lower pay than teachers in other rural areas
- graduate from prestigious universities at lower rates than other rural teachers[8]

Declining enrollments, limited course offerings, funding losses, and staff downsizing are common concerns. Subjects and activities deemed nonessential (clubs, art, music, etc.) are often eliminated from the curriculum or scheduled infrequently. Although districts may recognize the need to provide their students with these educational opportunities, economic survival is frequently the top priority for these districts and families.

Peggy Cook observes: "Researchers and policymakers alike have often overlooked the economic and social conditions of rural minorities. With historically higher rates of poverty and unemployment and lower levels of education, these minorities, nonetheless, represent a disproportionate share of the disadvantaged segment of rural population."[9] A striking feature in many southern counties is the great disparity in poverty levels between Whites and Blacks. For example, the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi had average 1990 census poverty rates of 51.4 percent for Blacks compared to 15.4 percent for Whites. This disparity reflects not only economic differences between groups but also a continuation of social inequality in this region. These data suggest that many African Americans in the rural south live in highly stratified communities, often populated by a small elite group possessing a disproportionate share of the resources and positions that provide a good income.[10]

A recent study by Debra Blackwell & Diane McLaughlin shows that while overall educational attainment of rural and urban students is not very different on average, huge gaps exist between the attainment of African American students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds in both rural and urban settings. Advantaged rural boys are likely to complete 18.4 years of school; advantaged rural girls complete 19.1 years. Predicted attainments in disadvantaged regions are only 9.4 years for rural boys and 10.9 years for girls. This represents about a nine-year gap.[11]

These data show that rural schools serving poor, rural African American children and youth need help. Despite the fact that disparities and challenges of impoverishment reportedly are sharpest in the rural South, strategies for improving the academic achievement and attainment of poor African American students have almost been exclusively situated in urban contexts.

Poor African American youth residing in urban areas often have access to transportation and other resources (museums, parks, public concerts, boys'/girls' clubs, etc.) that are simply nonexistent in poor rural communities. Lack of public and private transportation often limits what poor families and schools systems can provide their students. While urban poverty commonly is highly visible because of its proximity to centers of commerce and decision making, rural poverty and its impact on children is frequently invisible. Community services, such as housing, daycare, transportation, health care, elder care, etc., are often unavailable or inadequate. Poor, rural African American children who leave school usually are geographically confined. Their worlds are circumscribed by school, family, chores, and church. When the school year ends, they rarely get to experience summer vacations or camps. Summer passes and the cycle starts over again. Low educational expectations for rural minority children, poverty, and lack of enrichment opportunities place educational outcomes in rural southern school districts among lowest in the nation.

Whatever the challenges, educators and policy-

makers must acknowledge that African Americans care deeply about the education opportunities afforded their children. The hardships and dangers endured to bring *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* before the U.S. Supreme Court affirm this care. Patricia Kusimo states:

> Decision-making structures in many rural commu nities limit the influence African American parents (especially those with low incomes) can have on educational decisions affecting their children. They have few avenues by which they can chal lenge curriculum choices, instructional strategies, or course placement decisions. School officials often dismiss African American students' absence in advanced and college preparatory courses as a normal reflection of students' interests, academic talents, and parents' lack of interest. However, African American parents have long cared deeply about education and so have their children.[12]

What is needed now is to renew the vision of a quality education for African American children, which the *Brown* decision foreshadowed. Current educational efforts are either insufficient or ineffective. If the educational achievement and attainment of rural African American children is to improve, African American parents, individually and collectively, must have an intimate knowledge of and involvement with the educational infrastructure. Too many African American parents are alienated from the process of schooling and feel powerless to impact their children's educational outcomes. African American churches in rural communities can be natural allies to empower African American parents to mitigate these negative circumstances.

The African American Church: A Legacy of Activism

It is a mistake, then, to think of the black church in America as simply, or even primarily, a religious institution in the same way the white church might be conceived. From the beginning community service has been an element of black religious expression.[13]

On Thursday night, January 12, 1865, 20 Black church leaders were summoned to a mansion in Savannah, Georgia, to meet with General William T. Sherman. They were asked how the U.S. government could best institute or implement the Emancipation Proclamation. This single act set the precedent for what has most certainly been two of the most vital social roles of the African American church—advocate and activist. Billingsley points to the unique place of the Black church within African American culture. It is in the same place today as it was in 1865. This uniqueness is completely owned and controlled by the African American people. It exemplifies freedom, independence, and respect for its leadership. It allows opportunities for self-esteem, self-development, leadership, and relaxation. In addition to being a community and recreational center that encourages education, the Black church also encourages business development and fellowship outside the congregation.[14]

Churches, both Black and White, have always played a vital role in providing educational opportunities for African Americans. From childhood through graduate school, faith communities have fostered educational opportunities within the African American community. In many communities, the most educated pastor would assume the duties of schoolmaster for all children and youth. In the early years of the Civil War, prior to Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, abolitionists from Pennsylvania joined with faith communities and established Penn School on St. Helena's Island in Beaufort County, South Carolina, to educate freed slaves from the sea islands around Port Royal Sound.[15] Bethune-Cookman, Morehouse, and Virginia Union are only three examples of historically Black colleges and universities founded and supported by faith communities that recognized the need to provide African Americans with access to education. These and other colleges began not only as colleges and universities but also as grammar and normal schools. In the first instance, they provided basic academic and literacy skills; in the latter, they developed the labor force (teachers) to educate others. Even the impetus for developing Sunday school and Christian education programs in these churches was as much due to concern for literacy and educational development as it was for religious and spiritual growth.

African American churches have hosted special programs that increase adolescents' academic skills, implemented parenting programs, organized groups to address issues impacting the schooling of youth, rallied community members to attend PTA meetings, and partnered with colleges to increase the number of African American youth attending postsecondary education institutions.[16] Intuitively, they knew what Cynthia Duncan states, "Education is always the first step for those who have moved from poverty and disadvantage in the lower class to stability and opportunity in the middle class. . . in every case a good education is the key that unlocks and expands the cultural tool kits of the have nots."[17] African American churches have a tradition of strength and a fierce commitment to their communities. In many rural communities, they have provided the support to initiate and sustain social change.[18] Also, rural churches have a strong tradition of developing lay leadership by involving significant numbers of members in decision-making advocacy, community leadership, and institutional development.[19] They provide a strong voice that can and will call attention to education issues, such as accountability, both within and outside the African American community.

Strengthening School and Community Relationships

Kusimo writes: "In the old segregated school system, Black children attended schools operated mostly by skilled Black educators . . . for many African American children, African American teachers represented surrogate parent figures, acting as disciplinarians, counselors, role models, and advocates."[20] African American teachers could assume these roles because they were an integral part of the segregated community. They worked in the community, lived in the community, volunteered in the community, and worshiped in the community. Today, educators in many rural school districts, both African American and White, do not reside in the community. Although these educators may be vested in the outcomes of their professional efforts, their absence from the other dimensions of the community life leaves a void. Poor, rural African American children suffer disproportionally because of this void.

Partnerships in rural communities between local African American churches and the education community can begin to fill the void. Harold Trulear notes that

> Many congregations feel a sense of responsibility for community wholeness and well-being, both those churches with significant resident member ship and those that are essentially commuter congregations. In the former category, congrega tions consist of members from the neighborhood and, therefore, have a vested interest in the welfare of the community.[21]

African American churches can help disseminate information and assist with community mobilization. They may also be positioned to offer parenting programs, plus tutoring and enrichment programs for youth.

Research repeatedly affirms that the intricate involvement of parents and community members favorably affects student outcomes. Parent involvement is positively related to achievement, behavior, self-concept, future expectations, attendance, and motivation of their children.[22] The greater the level of involvement, the greater the achievement and performance benefits.[23] Not only are parents important, but the greater community context has a significant impact on student attitudes towards education. Community organizations help re-create the critical aspects of community that once made it possible to grow up and participate in mainstream society.[24] Problems of education cannot be treated separately from the context of the community institutions of which they are a part. Research demonstrates that learning does not take place in isolation.[25] Based on these understandings, solutions that work for poor, minority, rural children are not found in the school alone but in the interactions among the school, the child, and the community. Therefore, it is important to draw upon resources in the broader social, cultural, and economic context of home and community for educational improvement.[26] A recent brochure suggests, "Public schools and religious institutions have different missions, but they share many of the same civic and moral values."[27] Partnerships with African American faith communities present an opportunity for a win/win situation resulting in stronger communities and improved educational outcomes for youth.

Reaching out: An Action Agenda

There is a new and growing tone of civility. That is good for America and good for public education. Our public schools should not be the public space for a war on values. When you put schools in the middle, education losses. This is why I am encouraged when people of faith reach out to each other and act on their faith and help raise our children.
Richard W. Riley[28]

Secretary of Education Richard Riley's Guide to Religious Expression in Public Schools paves the way for partnerships with faith communities to support children's learning.[29] This society has concerns about separation of church and state, and local sensitivities must be considered. Partnerships between entities in the educational infrastructure and faith communities must focus on the common ground—the welfare of children and youth and the betterment of their lives—not on religious education. The Department of Education developed the following guidelines for partnerships with faith communities, providing a starting point for new collaborations.

Partnerships Involving Public Schools and Faith-based Communities

Public schools forming partnerships including faith-based communities should consider and adhere to the following in developing and supporting such activities.

Things to do:

- Make sure the program has a secular purpose.
- In selecting partners remain neutral between secular and religious groups and among religious groups.
- Select student participants without regard to the religious affiliation of the students.
- Make sure any jointly sponsored activities provided within the partnership program, wherever located, are purely secular.
- Make sure any space used for the program is safe and secure for the children.
- Make sure any space used by the public school for instructional purposes is free of religious symbols.
- Put the partnership agreement in writing.

Things not to do:

- Do not limit participation in the partnership, or student selection, to religious groups or certain religious groups.
- Do not encourage or discourage student participation with particular partners based on the religious or secular nature of the organization.
- Do not encourage or discourage students from engaging in religious activities.
- Do not condition student participation in any partnership activity on membership in any religious group, or on acceptance or rejection of any religious belief, or on participation in, or refusal to participate in, any religious activity.
- Do not reward or punish students (for example, in terms of grades or participation in other activities) based on their willingness to participate in any activity of a partnership with a religious organization.

Source: U. S. Department of Education, Partnership for Family Involvement in Education, *How Faith Communities Support Children's Learning in Public School* (brochure, no date)

Using these guidelines, schools can form meaningful relationships between education entities and faith communities. Partnerships with African American churches, which have provided historical support for the educational empowerment of African Americans, offer an entrance into a culture, system of values, and infrastructure that can be a powerful voice for the good of children. Partnerships in rural communities between African American churches and the local educational infrastructure must be just that, *partnerships*–each must contribute and each must gain. The following ideas and strategies, based upon research on family and community involvement, have been adapted for forming collaborations with African American faith communities.[80]

The guidelines included in the *Guide to Religious Expression in Public Schools* protect students, parents, and teachers. The following strategies are consistent with these guidelines and provide suggestions on developing relationships with African American faith communities that focus on improving educational outcomes for African American children.

Strategies to Improve Faith Community/School Collaborations

1. Recognize the need to form partnerships with local African American pastors and be proactive about developing them. Meet with individual pastors or make arrangements to speak to a local gathering of pastors to ask for their assistance.

2. Convene at least three meetings a year with African American faith communities. Ask faith communities to send representatives who can share information on supporting children and youth. Identify faith communities that have an interest in hosting tutorial programs, enrichment programs or, other extracurricular activities and create a plan to work with these faith communities.

3. Ask meeting participants to evaluate progress and identify obstacles. Take seriously their suggestions about meeting topics, formats, logistics (time, location, length, etc.), and amenities (child care and transportation needs, food, etc.).

4. Make a point to personally invite pastors or their representatives to school events. Ask them to share news of the event with their congregations. When African American pastors are present in schools, students feel their community is supporting their school efforts. It also increases the community's awareness of school activities.

5. Publicly acknowledge partnerships with African American faith communities. Thank-you notes and certificates of appreciation acknowledging the support of pastors and their congregations are invaluable in creating strong partnerships. Mention frequently and prominently the contributions of African American faith communities. Such efforts help cement relationships between the local school system and community.

6. Elicit feedback and ideas from African American faith community leaders to improve outreach efforts to African Americans. This is particularly critical if educators within local schools lack strong connections with local children and families. African American church leaders can provide grassroots support and leadership within the African American community for school initiatives. They can also be a conduit for information flowing between the school and community.

Compiled from: Deborah D. Davis and Janice Wright, eds., *Supporting Parent, Family, & Community Involvement in Your School* (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000).

Too many African American children in rural school systems will continue to be undereducated if authentic ways to engage the African American community in the schooling process are not found. In fact, Lisa Delpit observes, ". . . . Appropriate education for poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture. Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest."[31] Ron Edmonds reminds us, "We can, whenever and wherever we choose successfully teach all children whose education is of interest to us. . . . Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact we haven't so far."[32]

Partnerships with rural African American faith communities are essential if the academic achievement and attainment of rural African American children are to improve. African American churches historically have mobilized and organized grassroots improvement efforts; however, within each school, district, or community, someone must come forward to initiate these relationships. Educators and community members should consider taking the first step, as others have successfully done.[33] The separation of church and state issue need not preclude collaborations between public schools and faith communities. Rural educators, African American community members, and churches all must be willing to act on their faith to unite against the common foe of poorly educated children.

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14. Ibid., 354.

15. *Penn Center: St. Helena Island, Beaufort Co., SC,* http://beaufort-sc.com/penn/ (27 September 2000).

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19. Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience,* 109-10, 113.

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